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Changing Images

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When sizeable groups of Basques began to immigrate to the American West during the mid-to-late nineteenth century, few Americans knew much about the *Euskaldunak*. Recognition of the Basque presence would expand markedly in the next half century, however. By the early twentieth century, journalists, politicians, and government officials recognized Basques as notable participants in the western livestock industry, especially as sheepmen. Unfortunately, some of these reactions were not positive—in fact they were extremely negative. But in the late 1930s and in the postwar

decades of the 1940s and 1950s, images became more sympathetic, sometimes excessively romantic. Since the yeasty 1960s, an era in which many Americans discovered the importance of cultural diversity even while rediscovering their own ethnic heritages, Basques have frequently been hailed as rock-ribbed traditionalists, solid citizens of the first order. The launching of Basque ethnic celebrations, the formation of dance groups, the publication of several important books about western Basques, and the establishment of a national Basque organization have done much to communicate the Basque ethnicity to other Americans.

Before Basques appeared in the American West as miners, herders, and livestockmen, they played varied roles in earlier New World history. For example, we now know that the *Euskaldunak* were among the first whalers to cross the northern Atlantic, and they also worked as cod fishermen. If New World residents failed to note Basque presence in these occupations, their participation in the Spanish overseas empire as explorers, sailors, administrators and priests became increasingly clear. The famed cleric Bishop Juan de Zumarraga, New Mexican explorer and founder Juan de Onate, and Spanish official Juan Bautista de Anza were among the most noted Basques in the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries. Later, political leaders Jose Maria de Echeandia and Manuel Micheltorena and missionary and religious administrator Fermin Francisco de Lasuen occupied important leadership positions in Spanish and Mexican California, even though they were rarely recognized as Basques.

The first Basques to be widely recognized ethnically were participants in the gold rushes and livestock industry of the second half of the nineteenth century. Soon after news of the California gold strikes spread to South American, thousands of Basques streamed into the Far West from the south. In addition to working as miners, these newcomers later became herders and livestockmen, thereby helping to fill the demand for fresh meat among miners and other settlers flooding into the West. By the 1870s, the Altube brothers, Pedro and Bernardo, and French Basques Jean and Grace Garat had invaded the Great Basin, founding sprawling ranches in Nevada. Gradually, the names and reputations of these and other successful *Euskaldunak* stuck in the memories of American westerners, especially among their competitors. Scattered references to "those Basques," "those Frenchmen from the Pyrenees," and "those Vizcainos" began to appear in newspapers, memoirs and government reports.

Not all these mentions were positive; in fact, some were decidedly negative. For instance, in the midst of the Spanish-American War, the Carson City (Nevada) *Morning Appeal* referred to Basques passing through the area as "these copper-colored bull fighters" "full of war talk." Even more vitriolic was Nevada Senator Key Pittman's attack on Basque sheepmen as "lacking in intelligence, independence, and anything else." "They are nothing but sheepherders," he continued. Adding to these negative stereotypes was a report in the Caldwell (Idaho) *Tribune* of July 1, 1909. "The sheepmen of Owyhee County are sorely beset by Biscayans," the editor reported: "Bascos, as they are commonly called," and their "scale of living . . . [and] . . . methods of doing business . . . are on a par with those of the Chinaman." These Basques "are filthy, treacherous and meddlesome . . . They are clannish and undesirable . . . [and] will make life impossible for the white man." Then the journalist, after having harpooned what he considered repugnant intruders, had to admit that the Basques worked "hard and [had] their money."

Although these negative images spiced newspaper and government reports well into the 1930s, other more positive images surfaced alongside these demeaning portraits. In several western cities and towns such as San Francisco, Reno, Elko, and Buffalo, Wyoming, Basques were saluted as hardworking, ambitious newcomers. Especially was this the case in Boise, where the Basques established an enclave that may have made up nearly 5 percent of the population. Known first as herders, livestockmen, miners, and construction workers, they soon established several boardinghouses and, eventually, restaurants known for their enormous inexpensive meals. The Boise Basques also gained reputations as devout Catholics and sturdy athletes.

Three events in the next generation from the 1930s to the 1960s helped transform images of the Basques in the American West. When the Spanish Republicans, whom the Basques supported (as did many American volunteers, including Ernest Hemingway), lost the Spanish Civil War, hundreds of Spanish Basque men were more than willing to abandon their home country for jobs in the New World, helping to swell the numbers of herders in the American West. Also the passage of the Taylor Grazing Act in 1934 essentially ended the careers of dozens of Basque "tramp sheepmen" who before that legislation tried to survive on government-owned grazing lands in states such as Nevada, Idaho, and California. Even though the act squeezed out most of these itinerant livestockmen, it also helped to end negative images of Basques as selfish, greedy sheepmen. Most of these unsavory representations had disappeared by the end of World War II.

Important too in shaping a new, more positive image of Basques was Robert Laxalt's novelized biography of his Basque father, *Sweet Promised Land* (1957). A pleasant, smoothly written narrative of Dominique Laxalt, the archetypal sheepherder working his lonely trade in the meadows and mountainsides of Nevada, this popular book appealed to thousands of Basques as *the* story of the Basque herder, even as it informed larger numbers of non-Basques about the courage, ambitions, and optimistic outlook of these enigmatic peoples.

Not surprisingly, the dramatic events of World War II, the Cold War, and the 1960s triggered a new set of experiences and image-changes for the *Euskaldunak*. Special needs among livestockmen brought in a new generation of immigrant herders through the 1950s, even as earlier Basques moved to nearby towns and cities. As they clustered together in urban areas throughout Idaho, Nevada, and California and in smaller communities in Oregon, Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, the Basques frequently gathered to celebrate through dances, picnics, and athletic competitions. At first these events were limited to Basques, but in 1959, the first national Basque festival, celebrated in Sparks, Nevada, began a tradition of bringing together *Euskaldunak* and non-Basques at annual Basque festivals and gatherings.

Concurrently, Basques were making their way into political arenas. In Oregon, Anthony Yturri played a major role in state politics, while Pete Cenarrusa served continuously as Secretary of State in Idaho for nearly 30 years. Meanwhile, after a successful stint as Nevada's governor, Paul Laxalt was elected a U.S. Senator. A close friend of Ronald Regan, Laxalt moved in high Republican circles and was even rumored to be a possible vice-presidential or presidential candidate. Although few Americans outside the West seemed to understand his Basque heritage, westerners—and Basques

especially—recognized his conservative politics and traditionalism as well-known Basque hallmarks.

New organizations also helped to spawn revised images of the Basques. Sensing a need to coordinate their efforts, Basque clubs joined forces to launch the North American Basque Organizations (NABO), which helps sponsor region-wide Basque celebrations, encourages ethnic projects, and coordinates and underwrites other endeavors. The Basque Studies Program at the University of Nevada, Reno, housing the world's best Basque library, also has done much to spawn a new generation of researchers, American and European, who in turn have produced a rich crop of scholarly and popular books. The Reno center likewise administrates a well-organized program of overseas studies in the Basque Country, as well as a full round of student and faculty exchanges with Old World Basques. The center and the University of Nevada Press also jointly sponsor a Basque Book Series numbering more than 20 volumes, including Robert Laxalt's Basque Family Trilogy, several books by the country's leading scholar of Basques, William A. Douglass, and popular Basque cookbooks, photographic books on Basque sheepherders, and Basque dictionaries and grammars. These organizations and programs have not only given numerous Basques a wider window on the world, but additionally have provided non-Basques fuller, more dependable portraits of the *Euskaldunak* than were available in romantic Sunday newspaper supplements.

Obviously, then, images of the Basques have shifted dramatically over the centuries, and especially since significant numbers of Basques began arriving slightly more than a century ago. At this point one needs to ask what are the contemporary images of Basques in the American West, how are they presently seen from without and within? Knowing that these images are continually in transition, one can still say that most Americans continue to associate Basques with shepherding, even though increasingly smaller numbers of *Euskaldunak* are involved in that occupation. Revealingly, Basques themselves erected a gigantic, modernistic sculpture (just outside Reno) of a sheepherder when they chose to memorialize their presence in the American West. In addition, Basque festivals and Basque restaurants, still operational in California, Nevada, and Idaho, continue to provide tourists and travelers with images of colorful, robust, and patriotic *Euskaldunak*. And an expanding group of scholars has produced well-researched essays and books examining the Basque presence in the U.S. and elsewhere, demonstrating that Basques played other, more complex roles in addition to their work as herders.

Present-day images of Basques, then, marry the old and new. Without abandoning earlier pictures of Basques as herders and livestockmen, increasing numbers of Basques and onlookers alike now realize that Basques also have been—and still are—recognizable participants in the West's agriculture, politics, and ethnic makeup. Interpreters will continue to portray Basques as herders even as they begin to view them as important Westerners taking part in a variety of other jobs and activities. At the same time, Basques are represented as a separate minority and occupational group as well as traditional, loyal Americans.